



Afghanistan Engineer District North



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Corps of Engineers helps develop next generation of Afghan workers

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QURGHAN, Afghanistan – As a group of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers employees arrived to tour a police compound under construction in a village in the northern region of the country on Feb. 14, an Afghan man in a black leather jacket met them at the gate and led them inside.

The man pointed out the most recent work completed by a team of Afghan construction workers to project engineers Valdez Blackwell and Chuck Cameau. The Afghan man guided them through the heavily constructed building, noting the quality and progress of the electrical system, the plumbing system, guard towers, well houses, boundary walls and other aspects of the job. Likewise, he also pointed out deficiencies in the construction.

The man also served as a translator between the Corps personnel and the construction crew's foreman and workers, who all spoke Dari. After wrapping up the inspection, the Afghan man, Blackwell, Cameau and their armed security team moved onto similar projects in the near-by villages of Andkhoy and Khana Char Bah.

The Afghan man who wore a black leather jacket that day serves as a quality assurance inspector for the Corps of Engineers' area office in Mezar-i Sharif, which has oversight of millions of dollars' worth of construction projects in the northern region of Afghanistan. (Freedom Builder is not identifying the man by name because of concerns for his safety.)



In all, 30 Afghans work in professional capacities for the Mezar-i Sharif area office as part of the Corps of Engineers' human capital development initiative in Afghanistan. Some work primarily in Corps of Engineers offices, while others work primarily in the field. Similarly, other Corps of Engineers offices in the north district of Afghanistan tap the local workforce.

Quality assurance inspectors review and report the status of Corps of Engineers projects across the country. For some projects in distant locations, they are the only representatives of the Corps of Engineers to visit the sites.

The intent of the program is two-fold, said Col. Michael McCormick, the officer in charge of the Corps of Engineers' headquarters in northern Afghanistan. Afghan workers extend the Corps of Engineers' ability to build infrastructure projects in the country, which is the size of Texas. And more importantly, the program is helping develop a new generation of Afghan workers with job skills that languished during three decades of war.

Afghanistan has a labor force of 15 million people, but 40 percent are unemployed, and 53 percent of the country's population lives below the poverty line, according to the 2010 edition of The CIA World Factbook, which compiles statistics about countries worldwide.

In that type of economy, job skills are priceless, McCormick told about 150 contractors at a small business conference on Jan. 10 in Kabul.

"Skills transcend wages. Once workers gain that knowledge, they have it forever. It's theirs. It's locked in their heads," he said at the conference that was sponsored by the Afghanistan Investment Support Agency. "It allows them the opportunity to earn a better living, and to pass on a trade or this better living to their children," he said.

The thinking is that after the coalition's multi-billion-dollar rebuilding efforts in Afghanistan come to completion, the skilled Afghan workers will remain and be available to work on new private-sector construction jobs.



The man in the black leather jacket and other Afghans aligned with the Corps of Engineers in the Mezar-i Sharif area office are eager to learn new skills and they're attuned to the Corps of Engineers' interests, Blackwell said.

"They're very interested in what we're doing," he said. "They actually do pretty a good job, as far as quality assurance, as far as making sure workers are paid, as far as safety. If they get any pushback or problems, they'll let us know."

Part of that success is spurred by close interaction among American Corps of Engineers personnel and Afghan hires, said Lt. Col. Steven Jordan, the officer in charge of the Mezar-i Sharif operation. Americans and Afghans work side by side both in the office and in the field. Furthermore, Corps of Engineers personnel present monthly seminars on specialized topics such as electrical codes, reading architectural plans, and computer-aided drafting.

Simply working in the same setting spurs meaningful development, Jordan said.

"What I've noticed during my almost nine months here is that their English-speaking ability has just soared. Some of them could just speak one or two words when I got here," he said. "It's just the daily interaction with our folks, both in a working environment and a social environment."

Jordan is making plans to increase social interaction with regularly scheduled lunches for all members of the staff. He said he took a cue for the mealtime get-togethers from Gen. Stanley McChrystal's counterinsurgency guidance, which is posted in the Mezar-i Sharif office. McChrystal, the commander of international forces in Afghanistan, wrote in August 2009 that conflict in Afghanistan will be won by gaining the support of the population, rather than by destroying the enemy.

They relevant passage of the general's message states: "Live, eat, and train together, plan and operate together, depend on one another, and hold each other accountable – at all echelons down to soldier level. Treat them as equal partners in success."

The all-staff lunches will present ideal opportunities for meaningful social interaction, Jordan said.





"We can just talk about their hopes, their dreams, their aspirations, how they feel about the coalition effort here," he said. "How is their image of us and our effort different than what they grew up seeing or hearing from their parents about the Soviet era? Do they see the effort that we're doing together as a springboard toward a self-sufficient, democratic Afghanistan?"

Another Afghan who has been working with the Corps of Engineers since 2006 said he has had a positive experience. The man, who was wearing a gray suit jacket one day recently, started as an administrative assistant in the Mezar-i Sharif office and has since been promoted to a quality assurance inspector. (Freedom Builder is not identifying him by name because of concerns for his safety.)

"I am so happy. I am coming here. I am working here. I find lots of experiences from here," the man in the suit jacket said in English. "And I like everybody. We are working like a family here."

Working with the Corps of Engineers provides an ideal setting to learn about the engineering and construction trades, because the Corps adheres to construction standards that other organizations in Afghanistan ignore, he said. "This is an engi-

neering office. It is the best office in Afghanistan to work, because of standard work," he said. He plans to become an engineer himself.

While the relationship is positive on a one-to-one basis, the capacity development program isn't regarded warmly by everyone in Afghanistan.

The man in the gray suit jacket said he hasn't told his Afghan friends that he works with Corps of Engineers, because he is afraid the information might somehow get into the hands of anti-American insurgents. Instead, he's told friends that he works for an Afghan construction company, which is technically correct, because the Corps of Engineers holds a contract with an Afghan company that provides the workers, rather than with the individual Afghan workers themselves.

Jordan said the country simply isn't stable enough yet for some Afghan workers to be public about their association with the Corps of Engineers. They – or their families – could become targets of insurgents. "The last thing we want to do is jeopardize the safety and security of one of these people who really are putting their lives on the line daily to support our mission," he said.